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Fandangos and Bailes: Dancing and Dance Events in Early California

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A Californian would hardly pause in a dance for an earthquake, and would renew it before the vibrations ceased.[2]

It would be simplistic to say that the *Californios* loved to dance. Travellers to Alta California remarked upon the intense passion and interest in dance in almost every account of life in Spanish (1769–1821) and Mexican (1821–1848) California.[3] Dancing fulfilled a number of very real needs of a society politically and economically isolated from the gravitational centers of Mexico City and Madrid, and was characterized by rigorous social customs and segregation of the sexes.

Many descriptions of early colonial California attests to the near fanatical love of dancing, to the numerous occasions when the Californians danced, and to the importance and prestige accorded to an outstanding dancer. Dance as an important activity claims a crucial space in the reminiscences of early Californian residents. Feminist Chicana historian Antonia I. Castañeda notes, "Dance was especially important as a medium of individual and group expression and allowed both men and women to demonstrate their skill, talent, and grace. Special dances were performed by children and adults, groups and couples and married and single people. Women and men danced both together and separately."[4]

Nineteenth-century missionaries and merchants, seafarers and sailors who traveled to California also noted this passion for dance. In 1832, Thomas O. Larkin said that the men on his ship participated in early Californian social and recreational activities while onshore, "hunting wild Deer or dancing with tame 'Dear,' both being plentiful in and around Monterey. With the flagship's splendid band, there were as many balls as there were Sundays, with 'Waltzes, *Quadrilles*, *Hotas* [jotas], *Sons* [sones], *Arabes* [jarabes], *Bolero* with castaneta, Etc.'—some who had never danced before 'danced here.'"[5]

For an understanding of Walter Colton's oft-quoted remark, which opens this essay, and which depicts the passion and intensity with which the Californians danced, two factors must be taken into account. The first key to understanding the early Californians and the society in which they lived is isolation. Isolation—geographic, economic, cul-

tural, and social—greatly shaped the social conditions that existed in early California. One must remember that Monterey, the largest settlement in Alta California was, in fact, small: "by the 1830s [it] was a settlement of nearly six hundred souls: two hundred men, fewer women, more children, two dozen Indians, and twenty-six to thirty *extranjeros* [foreigners]" lived there.[6] Because of this socioeconomic and cultural isolation, Californios had to fall back on their own resources for entertainment and art.[7]

For travelers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who came to California under the auspices of the colonial Spanish and Mexican governments, California was considered a far western outpost. Spain, especially, was interested in defending its territories in the north against the English and the Russians, and was eager to expand its business interests in a land as rich as California. As historian David Weber notes, "Still another economic framework might place Spanish North America beyond the periphery of the world economic system, and even beyond the fringes of empire."[8] The first Spanish-speaking women did not arrive in California until 1774, when eight women came with a small number of men to join the "Sixty Spanish, mestizo and other *casta* soldiers dispatched to defend the frontier against European incursions" who had arrived in 1769.[9] Thus, 1769 marked the time when "Spain had planted a slight and uncertain colony on the northwest coast."[10]

The settlers who came to California during the period of Spanish rule (1769–1821) were not necessarily of aristocratic Spanish blood. As in other colonial outposts, these agents of the Spanish crown who supposedly introduced Andalusian folk songs and dances in their secluded ranchero patios (so beloved of the early Anglo American chroniclers) were recruited from the lower classes, and were rarely Spaniards, but rather Mexicans. "According to the 1793 census of colonial New Spain, Alta California's population of *gente de razón*—the Spanish-speaking Christians of all ethnic backgrounds—was 1,066 persons, of whom only thirty (or 3%) were actually European Spaniards. The remaining 1,036 were soldiers, settlers, and artisans born in Mexico."[11] Aside from the occasional wife of the governor or a high-ranking military officer, the majority of the population of California from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century resembled the complex racial and socioeconomic population of Australia, England's penal colony. As Castañeda explains,

> Artisan wives, or women from what may be considered the middle strata of eighteenth-century colonial Mexican society, did not settle in California. The women who came to stay belonged instead to the lower socioeconomic classes of New Spain. They were the mothers, wives, daughters, and kinswomen of leather-jacket soldiers who staffed the frontier presidios of New Spain, of impoverished settlers who lived in the adjoining civilian pueblos, and of convicts from Mexico and Guadalajara sentenced to Alta California in lieu of other punishment.[12]

Many travelers, until setting foot on American soil, imagined Spanish California as consisting mainly of large ranchos. However, the Spanish colonial period in California, as in New Mexico and Arizona, was vast and complex, resulting in the founding of the mission system (forced conversion of Native Americans), military presidios, and two ultimately successful civil settlements: Los Angeles and San José. There were no more than twenty-five land grants given during the entire fifty-two-year Spanish colonial period. "The first private land grant in Alta California, a small tract of land near Mission San Carlos in present-day Carmel, was awarded in 1775 by California Governor Rivera

to Manuel Butrón and his Indian wife.... Only about twenty-five grants were awarded during the Spanish period from 1769–1821."[13]

Many more such ranchos were granted during the Mexican regime, in a much shorter period of time: "about eight hundred—were awarded during the Mexican period, from 1821 to 1848."[14] "They became the most prominent feature of California society."[15] Thus, ironically, it was during the Mexican period, not the fondly remembered Spanish period, that the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers looked back to as the halcyon days of pastoral California rancho life filled with music, dance, and fiestas.

The extreme popularity of dancing and music also owes a good deal to the status of women in traditional Spanish society. Spanish Catholic religious and social values confined women to the domestic sphere; at the same time, the economics of rancho life meant that aristocratic Spanish society was largely equestrian. This was also true of the English gentry, but in Spanish society, women rarely rode and were more sequestered. In addition, the presence of a large Native American labor force, and the disdain for manual labor by most of the settlers, reduced the physical exercise opportunities for women. It is important to note that the most onerous forms of "Spanish labor systems had been abolished by 1769," however, "treatment of the Native Americans amounted to slavery in some instances," according to Steven Haskel in "Land, Labor, and Production" (122).

An apt description from one of the elite women of early California tells us:

> The ladies of Monterey in 1828 were rarely seen in the street, except very early in the morning on their way to church. We used to go there attended by our servants, who carried small mats for us to kneel upon, as there were no seats. A tasteful little rug was considered an indispensable part of our belongings and every young lady embroidered her own.... One of the gallants of the time said that "dancing, music, religion, and amiability" were the orthodox occupations of the ladies of Alta California.... We were in many ways like grown-up children. Our servants were faithful, agreeable, and easy to manage. They often slept on mats on the earthen floor, or, in the summer time, in the courtyards. When they waited on us at meals, we often let them hold conversations with us, and laugh without restraint. As we used to say, a good servant knew when to be quiet and when to put in his *cuchara* (or spoon).[16]

The above quotation illustrates the ways in which New Spain's colonial notions, which were embedded in the racialist casta paintings depicting the dangerous results of racial and class mixing, and the formation of twenty-four named racial categories that marked the society of New Spain, also characterized early Californian society, but on a smaller scale.

Male-oriented horseback riding and such rough-and-tumble sports as bullfighting and bear- and bull-baiting relegated women in this society to the role of observers, although *toreras* (female bullfighters) were celebrated in Spain throughout the nineteenth century. "There were some skilled horsewomen, but not many. When a woman rode, it was side-saddle, with a wooden or straw platform on which her feet could rest. A protective male sat just behind her on the crupper, one arm holding her and the other handling the reins."[17] This, coupled with the Spanish tradition against manual labor for aristocrats and the large number of indentured neophyte (Native American) labor, restricted the activities of the elite California woman to embroidery and the management of servants in the household. Thus, the only physical activity open to women of the leisure class, beyond walking about the ranch, was dancing. One observer noted,

> I was astonished at the endurance of the California women in holding out, night after night, in dancing, of which they never seemed to weary, but kept on with an appearance of freshness and elasticity that was as charming as surprising. Their actions, movements and bearing were as full of life and animation after several nights of dancing as at the beginning, while the men, on the other hand, became wearied, showing that their powers of endurance were not equal to those of the ladies. I have frequently heard the latter ridiculing the gentlemen for not holding out un-fatigued to the end of a festival of this kind.[18]

It should come as no surprise that the men, after a long day in the saddle overseeing their extensive land holdings, were not as eager to dance for long hours as were the women, who had few other physical outlets.

Living conditions in early California were quite rudimentary in the first few decades: "Life on an Alta California ranch in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was arduous and lonely."[19] By the 1830s, with the establishment of more populous small towns and outlying working ranches, life became somewhat easier. In the Mexican Californian period, many wealthy families were able to import into Alta California the elegancies of life alongside basic necessities without which they had lived for decades. "The unexpected, but profitable, development of the hide and tallow trade and the subsequent connection with world markets revolutionized ranchero life in Alta California. Ranching, that had generally been a subsistence life style, was irreversibly changed by the wealth derived from the new trade ... the rancheros were able to afford new material comforts. The wealthier rancheros built better homes, furnished them with articles purchased from the Boston merchant ships that regularly plied Alta California's coastline, and began to adopt European dress styles."[20] The stratification of society along Spanish caste lines accompanied this growth and expansion, which is discussed in further detail below.

The difference between the Spanish period's tiny ranches, allotted mostly to retired military, and the ranches of the Mexican period, during which some 800 probably existed, was in size and scope. Tallow and hides, the most important products of the Mexican period, enabled the rancheros to enjoy a much higher standard of living.

Although change was resisted on many levels, the Californios avidly adapted to it, as far as they were able, in dancing and clothing; however, change was slow, and the major agents of change were new colonists. The Padres-Hijar ranch/colony in the Mexican California of 1834, for example, inaugurated new dances and new clothing innovations because several well-educated persons of social rank lived in the colony.

The occasions for dancing and the types of dance events in early California were many and varied. For our purposes, they can be essentially divided into two categories: formal and informal. The difference between formal and informal dance events was reflected in their scope and functions, such as the dances that were performed, who danced and at what point in the evening or during the fiesta, the required European ideas of etiquette, and other elements.[21]

Usually, informal dance events were for the entertainment and amusement of the participants. Beyond this, the ramifications on a social level were few. Informal dance parties also served an important pedagogical function as learning environments for children, who are never mentioned as attending formal dance events. Indeed, matters of age were important; the elderly were held in great honor and younger men and

women did not dance without their consent. Not until the strains of the stately minuet and *contradanza* died away were the vivacious dances played that appealed to the younger participants. In informal dance events, etiquette was greatly relaxed. Anglo American Hubert Bancroft, a well-known chronicler of life in early California, observed:

> Dancing was a passion with the Californians. It affected all, from infancy to old age; grandmothers and grandchildren were seen dancing together; their houses were constructed with reference to this amusement, and most of the interior space was appropriated to the *sala*, a large, barn-like room. A few chairs and a wooden settee were all its furniture. If a few people got together at any hours of the day, the first thought was to send for a violin and guitar and should the violin and guitar be found together in appropriate hands, that of itself was sufficient reason to send for the dancers.[22]

Another nineteenth-century chronicler, Dr. Platon Vallejo, recalled:

> The evenings were given over to pure merriment. Every hacienda had its stringed band of several pieces, the harp, the guitar, and violin—once in a while a flute. And every night, rain or shine—except at times of death or sorrow, there was a *baile*. In this, every one had his part. The elder people stepped the stately *contradanza*. The budding generations enjoyed the waltz and the beautiful Spanish folk dances to the accompaniment of the *castanetas*, and even the little ones had their own figures to romp through. In short, the occasion was one for all-around pleasure of the natural unconscious style, without restraint or starchiness, where not a few, but everyone enjoyed themselves.[23]

These descriptions are a far cry from the rigid etiquette enforced at more formal balls, or *bailes*. Formal dance events, which represented one of the socially sanctioned occasions when marriageable men and women could meet, had far-reaching socioeconomic implications in early California. It is certain that much matchmaking took place during the events, since the parents could look over the crop of eligible bachelors and maidens. The young, especially those who were not formally declared marriageable, were not permitted to attend these formal dances.

> The respect in which our parents and elderly persons generally were held was so great that no young man ventured to dance in their presence without first having received permission. From 1831 to 1832, customs became less strict; dances became more exclusive and were usually given in the homes of private persons.
>
> What I have said about dances I learned at long distances from them, for I was never permitted to attend one of them until I was twenty or twenty-one years old. All the other young men were in the same situation.... I confess that even when I reached an age when I could attend dances, I went to them merely out of curiosity and never danced or sang.
>
> Dances were generally opened by older persons ... and the young people were not permitted by any chance to take part in them unless they happened to be married; and even then, it was not often allowed. But when the hour came for the old folks to retire, the older of the young fellows began to enjoy the dance.[24]

During the earliest colonial period until 1830, the population was so small that formal balls and events were open indiscriminately to all European social classes (that is, *gente de razon*—Spanish-speaking people).[25]

> Social relations between different classes of society were very equitable, since a sizable part of even the lowest class had claims to better origins (ordinary soldiers had such names as de la Cruz, Mercada, and de Roca Verde), from the outside society did not exhibit that sharp cleavage between different classes that we see in other countries.

Figure 1: A scene of dancers in a cantina, most likely performing a *fandango*, from *Trajes Mexicanos*, lithograph, unknown artist, about 1834 or 1835 (collection of Anthony Shay).

> External official relations always seemed to be on an equal footing, and even the lowest class behaved with dignity before high officials. At parties given by the Russian officers or Spanish authorities everyone entered the dance hall without difference in rank and without a special invitation, except a general announcement that there would be a fandango (the name of a certain dance). Single girls of all classes straightaway joined the circle of dancers equally with the highest members of society; married women and widows sat in the first unoccupied seats, and the men placed themselves in the corners and at the door, standing or sitting unceremoniously on the floor.[26]

This same freedom to attend public events, however, did not extend to converted and unconverted Native Americans. Their restricted access to social events was confined to their usefulness as mission-trained musicians who accompanied services and other religious social functions.

Formal dance events were prearranged affairs and their formality was marked by the presence of a master of ceremonies, or dance master, known as *el tecolero* or *el bastonero*. The tecoloro inaugurated the dancing with a *son*, a highly improvised dance accompanied by a myriad of tunes. His role was also to mediate between men and women, ensuring that every woman had an opportunity to take a turn on the dance floor and, thus, be seen by potential male suitors. The improvisational nature of the son allowed those with exceptional choreographic prowess to make themselves known. In formal dance events, couples were always segregated, except during the public event of dancing.

> The *señoras* and *señoritas* occupied a platform on one side (of the *enramada*, or outdoor arbor), the men remaining entirely separate. If there were many ladies and all the

seats were occupied by them, the men had to stand outside the door of the arbor, which was very wide. Some were on foot and some on horseback. The musicians occupied a place assigned to them in the center of one of the sides. There was one individual called the *tecolero* (master of ceremonies) who went around the edge, keeping time with his feet, and taking out the ladies to dance.

The manner of inviting a lady to dance was by making some pirouettes or dance steps before her, accompanied by clapping of the hands.... The lady who went out to dance returned to her post when she was ready and the tecolero went on making his pirouettes and taking out the ladies one by one until they all had danced. Anyone who was not familiar with the dance, or was not able on account of some illness, arose, took a turn, and sat down again in her place.[27]

"In the sones, the tecolero stepped out, keeping time with his feet and stopping in front of the first woman in the row while we clapped hands.... As soon as she finished her dance, she sat down and he led out another, until the last one had danced."[28] At this point in the dance, if a woman was very skilled, the tecolero would honor her by placing his hat on her head as she danced, and the other men would then follow suit.[29]

[W]hen a lady was prominent for her skill and grace in *El Son* or *El Jarabe*, the men placed their hats on her head, one on top of the other; and when she could carry no more, they threw them at her feet. Then they threw their *mangas*, or wraps, on the floor for her to honor them by dancing on them.

The musicians again commencing a lively tune, one of the managers approached the nearest female and, clapping his hands in accompaniment to the music, succeeded in bringing her into the centre of the room. Here she remained a while, gently tapping her feet upon the floor, and then giving two or three whirls, skipped away to her seat. Another was clapped out, and another, til the manager had passed the compliment throughout the room. This is called a *son*, and there is a custom among the men, when a dancer proves particularly attractive to any one, to place his hat upon her head, while she stands thus in the middle of the room, which she retains until redeemed by its owner, with some trifling present.[30]

As the population grew and social stratification created more complex fissures between rich and poor, native and immigrant, the Californios reverted to a reflection of Spanish society: a two-tiered caste system. This occasioned a division in society unknown in the earlier period that resulted in a concomitant division into two types of dance events: the *fandango* and the *baile*. By the 1830s, the term "fandango" was separated out from the "baile" and used to describe only dance events accepting of the working poor. Thereafter, fandangos increasingly became unruly events in which drinking and partying sometimes resulted in death and injury.

Formal balls were by invitation only and these exclusive events were now called bailes. In contrast, the fandango, which in its beginnings had been an open party event to which all were welcome, gradually became a public dance event of the lowest order. By the time the Gold Rush began, fandango "houses," where one could purchase drinks and dance, were the rage and were notorious for their rough atmosphere, similar to that of cowboy saloons. As often as not, wild brawls ensued, ending in killings. A fandango house was, in effect, a low-class cantina. "Beneath" the fandango were the dances of the people of the poorest class, the dances being the same [as the upper classes], but much exaggerated and unrestrained. These affairs generally ended in blows, wounds, accidents with horses, or at least with dirty and insulting words.

Throughout the mid-nineteenth century, the structure of dance events shifted fur-

ther, moving in tandem with socioeconomic and political currents. During the administrative rule of José María Echeandía (twice the Mexican governor of Alta California, 1825–1831, 1832–1833), it was usual for a party organizer to place an armed guard at the front door. The balls for "respectable" people were generally held in the *sala* of the government house, within the square of the old presidio. Invitations to families were issued by an appointed committee and entrance was permitted to only invited guests, who now had to present invitation cards to the guard upon entrance. All of the "respectable" families were invited whether they were poor or rich. By the end of the nineteenth century, dance events such as these were in decline; the best families withdrew. From then on, there were instituted dances of "tone" at which were present only those who hosted the dance. Despite this, new "modern" dances that were emerging in Europe and the Afro-Caribbean made their way with travelers to California and were seen on the dance floors up and down the coast. The contradanza, the waltz, and the cotillion became a California craze.[31]

It is probable that civil authorities tried to control some of the more excessive behavior of some dance events. The local authorities of the presidios and pueblos began demanding permits and fees.

> The permission of the authorities had to be obtained to hold a ball and illumination; as for instance, the one at Carrillo's house, in honor of Fitch's return with his bride in 1830.
>
> In 1837, at San Jose, a fandango required the permission of the alcalde. Owners or occupants of the house were held responsible, jointly with authors of the ball, for disorders. In a non-licensed dance, the first offense was a fine of $20 and the stoppage of the festivity.[32]

Formal dance events were extremely important to wealthy Californios and were marked by prior notice in the form of a public or announcement or private invitation. All important occasions, such as the arrival of a governor or other official or important visitor, the arrival of a ship, a religious Catholic holiday, or a secular rite of passage such as a wedding, engagement, or christening were marked by a dance. The participants to these important occasions often traveled long distances.

Very few California residents who have memories of these old fandango days and the journeys taken from suburb to town in order to participate in them are still alive. Doña Petra Pilar Lanfranco used to tell me how, as a young girl, she came up from the old Palos Verdes ranch house in a *carreta* (wagon), chaperoned by a female relative. On such occasions, the carreta would be provided with mattresses, pillows, and covers. Well-strapped at the carriage's end was the trunk containing the finery to be worn at the ball. To reach town, even from a point that would now be regarded as near, a start was generally made by four o'clock in the morning. It often took until late the same evening to arrive at the Bella Union [a hotel located in the downtown area of Los Angeles], where final preparations were made.[33]

The variety of locations in which dance events were held is intriguing. Aside from the large halls (salas) found in most private homes and the halls of the government in the presidios, Californians also danced in the open-air spaces of large ranches for which a unique temporary structure, the *enramada*, was built. Dancing in the enramada was almost always for formal dance events, for it took several days of preparation to

ready the dance floor's surface. This was sometimes a platform, or earth that was watered and pounded for days to create an evenly hardened surface.

> The Californios had still other diversions—such as the fandangos or dances that took place at all kinds of fiestas, religious or profane.
>
> For these dances, a great arbor was constructed in front of the house that was chosen for the function. The inside of the arbor was covered with white goods and some ornaments, such as ribbons, artificial flowers, etc. The arbor was closed in on three sides; the one left open was for the men on horseback, who placed themselves there, that side being well guarded with palings, or posts to keep out the horses. On the inside the ladies sat down on seats placed around the sides. The music, which consisted of a violin, a guitar, and two or three singers, was placed at one end, in order not to be in the way.
>
> The master of ceremonies, or leader was given the name of tecolero. He, at once, placed himself in the center of the arbor to organize the dance.[34]

Weddings lasted at least three days, during which there was almost nonstop dancing. Thus, a good floor became necessary to maintaining a healthy body.

> The married couple then enters the house where the near relatives are all waiting in tears to receive them. They kneel down before the parents of the lady, and crave a blessing, bestowed with patriarchal solemnity. On rising, the bridegroom makes a signal for the guests to come in, and another for the guitar and harp to strike up. Then commences the dancing, with only brief intervals for refreshment, but none for slumber: the wedded pair must be on their feet.[35]

Figure 2: An example of costumes for men and women. The woman's costume is an early version of a *china poblana* (a seventeenth- to nineteenth-century mode of dress with chemise, skirt and shawl [*rebozo*]). From *Costumes of Early California*, lithograph, unknown artist, about 1835 (collection of Anthony Shay).

The difference between the informal and formal dance events in town and on the ranchos is well illustrated by Davis:

> The rancheros and their household generally retired early, about eight o'clock, unless a *valsecito casero* (little home party) was on hand, when this lasted till twelve or one. They were fond of these gatherings, and almost every family having some musician of its own, music and dancing were indulged in, and a very pleasant time enjoyed. I have attended many of them and always was agreeably entertained. These parties were usually impromptu, without formality and were often held for the entertainment of a guest who might be stopping at the house. The balls or larger parties were of more importance, and usually occurred in the towns. On the occasion of the marriage of a son or daughter of a ranchero they took place on the rancho, the marriage being celebrated amid great festivities, lasting several days.
>
> Fandango was a term for a dance or entertainment among the lower classes where neighbors and others were invited in, and engaged themselves without any degree of formality. The entertainments of the wealthy and aristocratic class were more exclusive in character; invitations were more carefully given, more formality observed, and of course, more elegance and refinement prevailed. An entertainment of this character was known as a baile.
>
> In November 1838, I was a guest at the wedding party given at the marriage of Don José Martínez to the daughter of Don Ygnacio Peralta, which lasted about a week, dancing being kept up all night with a company of at least one hundred men and women from the adjoining ranchos, about three hours after daylight being given to sleep, after which picnics in the woods were held during the forenoon, and the afternoon was devoted to bullfighting. This programme was continued for a week when I myself had become so exhausted from want of regular sleep that I was glad to escape. The bride and bridegroom were not given any seclusion until the third night.[36]

Toward the end of this period, with the great influx of foreigners, balls and fandangos began to be held in rented public halls. At first, this was a respectable amusement.

> ... Only for the first few years after I came was the real fandango—so popular when Dana [author of *Two Years Before the Mast*] visited Los Angeles and first saw Don Juan Bandini execute the dance—witnessed here; little by little it went out of fashion, perhaps in part because of the skill required for its performance. Balls and hops, however, for a long time were carelessly called by that name. When the fandango rally was in vogue, Bandini, Antonio Coronel, Andrés Pico, the Lugos and other native Californians were among its most noted exponents; they often hired a hall, gave a fandango in which they did not hesitate to take the leading parts, and turned the whole proceeds over to some church or charity. On such occasions not merely the plain people (always so responsive to music and its accompanying pleasures) were the fandangueros, but the flower of our local society turned out en masse, adding to the affair a high degree of éclat.[37]

As Horace Bell lamented, "The old-fashioned fandango is a thing of the past. Reader, let us go to a fandango in 1853. Before we start, let us examine where we elbow our way through the dense crowd of Indians, peons, and pelados, the riff-raff, scruff and scum of our angel population, and amid jibe and jeer we gain the corridor or veranda."[38] Bell clearly enunciates the racist attitudes toward Mexicans and Native Americans that still exist in the blatant attempts to turn the Santa Barbara Spanish Days festival into a celebration of European rather than Mexican and/or indigenous contributions to California history. Needless to say, Bell observed the crumbling of a society that he and other Anglo Americans venerated but also helped destroy, and that society probably never had the rosy halo imagined.

Early California Dances

The actual dances performed by the Californios were numerous, and their names and musical compositions, as well as first-person reminiscences by pioneer descendants, are available.[39] These dances were of three types and correspond to the kinds of dance events and social environments in which they were performed: play party games; formal, patterned ballroom dances; and highly improvised solo and couple dances of Mexican, and perhaps, Spanish origin, requiring technical skill.

The play party games described in many sources were performed almost exclusively in the informal, family-oriented social gatherings for which early California became famous. In the largely rural, religiously conservative society of that period in which no other form of entertainment was available or church sanctioned, young and old, male and female could derive much pleasure and amusement from the many innocent play party games performed. In the play party games characterized by miming, especially animal movements, singing and dance movements were equally important. The skills required were minimal; anyone could join in. These games were impromptu, requiring no musical accompaniment other than the performers' singing, although literature and memoirs emphasize that in virtually every household there were musicians: guitarists, violinists, harpists, pianists, and/or flutists. Some popular and typical play party dance games were: *el borreg* (the lamb), *el caballo* (the horse), *la canastita de flores* (the little basket of flowers), *el burro* (the donkey), and *la zorrita* (the vixen). Many of the same games held different names in Europe than in the United States. When the first foreigners arrived, some games were already familiar to them, and they, too, could join in the festivities. Hence, dance and music helped absorb and assimilate recent arrivals to California more swiftly, opening a symbiotic exchange between "native" Californians.

> Spanish dances, especially in America, included many dramatics; the combination of the dramatics, the music, the singing, and the improvisations made them more like excerpts from a theatrical performance than proper dances.... There was always general animation, especially with dramatic dances presented as if they were excerpts from operas. Everyone, even the old men and women, joined in the singing and followed the course of activities with the greatest interest.[40]

In contrast, the skills required in the dancing of the *jota aragonesa*, a son, a *jarabe, la bamba*, or the fandango, were considerable. Rivalry erupted among the most outstanding dancers, especially among the women, to literally out dance, outshine, and outlast all of the others. As Esteban de la Torre, writing in 1930, noted,

> At the time when I came from Loreto to San Diego I was very fond of dancing, and was considered the best dancer in the country. I also sang in the Church of the Presidio of Loreto. One Chepa Rodriguez and I danced together at Santa Barbara. Chepa was much lauded as a great dancer. We danced the jarabe, and she got tired and sat down, leaving me still dancing. I also beat another lady who was a famous dancer. A challenge was sent out as far as Monterey for dancers to come and compete with me, but nobody came. That was on the occasion of the blessing of the Church at Santa Barbara.
>
> When I was young, I danced everything—sones, jarabes, *pontorico, medio catorce,* fandango, *la zorrita. Las pollitas,* and *el caballo.*[41]

As one can see, for many Californios dancing was not merely a lighthearted diversion but an activity upon which they expended many hours. A fine dancer of la bamba, for

example, could perform a vigorous *zapateado* (stamping, rhythmic footwork associated with flamenco) with a glass of water balanced on her head. Castanets seemed to have been employed for several of the dances as well. These improvised, competitive dances were performed both for formal and informal dance events. It is clear that the expertise in these dances was acquired by the young at home, since many years of practice and exposure are required for the skilled performance of these dances and the playing of castanets.

It is also clear that these dances were the first to disappear with the arrival of large numbers of Americans beginning in the 1840s, and other non–Spanish Europeans, since these newcomers lacked the background and training for their performance. By the 1850s, dances that once governed the social structure and leisure time of early rancheros had fallen out of favor. Some had been changed, such as the total transformation of the jota aragonesa to a simple-patterned ballroom dance whose steps retained fewer elements of the original dance; others, such as la bamba and the jarabe, disappeared altogether. Nevertheless, the many rich descriptions left in memoirs, coupled with our knowledge of current Mexican and Spanish folk dances, opens a rich cultural history of early Californians, whose love of dancing governed daily life.

More complex is the question of the European, Mexican, Caribbean, and American origins of the dances. The dance called the jota in early California is clearly not the vigorous Aragon variety: "However, some dancing was unlike the Spanish style, wherein women always take a spirited part. For instance, the jota, is similar to the Virginia reel in that men and women faced each other in long lines, the women remained almost motionless while the men danced exuberantly around them in circles."[42] This descriptive analysis brings to the surface the circulation of dances within the United States as European lands were colonized alongside Native American land and subsequently entered into U.S. territory.

The third type of dance, the ballroom dances of early California, were performed most often in formal dance events, and tended to be introduced long after their fashionableness had waxed and waned in Europe. "The minuet was fully preserved, although it was mainly danced by elderly people," one observer noted in 1824.[43] The waltz, forbidden by the Church under threat of excommunication, was not performed in California until 1830, nearly two decades after its social acceptance in Europe, at the close of the Napoleonic Wars. The most often mentioned ballroom dance of early Californians was the contradanza that is still performed by descendants of the early Californios, as well as patriotic folk dance groups.

In conclusion, one can see that the types of dances and dance events answered many requirements of the people of early California: entertainment, physical exercise, aesthetic outlet, societal control, and social interaction. The types of dances and dance events changed slowly over time with the concomitant changes in social environment, economy, government, power of the missions over daily life, and ethnic composition of new immigrants, especially the takeover by the Anglo Americans who dispossessed the Hispanic population of their land titles and, therefore, their social economies. Thus, the rich dances and dance events that once formed an integral part of daily life in nineteenth-century California faded, leaving their descendants the opportunity to write memoirs detailing what was lost.

Notes

1. The original version of this essay appeared as "Fandangoes and Bailes: Dancing and Dance Events in Early California," in *Southern California Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 99–113, © 1982 by the Regents of the University of California, published by the University of California Press. For this book I have added considerably to the notes to reflect the more recent scholarship concerning early California. It has taken years for scholars to come to grips with the historical romancing of early California and its inhabitants by early Anglo-American boosters of the state such as Charles Loomis and Hubert Bancroft, who portrayed early California as a pastoral paradise, as if only Spaniards lived here, Mexicans were an inconvenient presence, and Native Americans were erased or turned into docile and silent servants in the style of *Ramona*. But early California was overwhelmingly Mexican, with very few Spaniards, aside from one or two governors and a couple of priests; the vast majority of the population of mixed white, African, and Indian mestizos came from Sinaloa and Sonora. Together, in rancho, mission, and presidio, the Hispanic population treated the Native population terribly.
2. Walter Colton, quoted in Nellie Van de Grift Sanchez, *Spanish Arcadia* (San Francisco: Powell, 1929), 314.
3. *Californios* is the Spanish term for those who lived in California and spoke Spanish. The term applied to those who lived in both Alta (Upper) and Baja (Lower) California, territory that today is the state of California in the United States and one of the states of Mexico, respectively.
4. Antonia I. Castañeda, "*Presidarias y Pobladoreas*: The Journey North and Life in Frontier California," in *En Aquel Entonces: Readings in Mexican-American History*, ed. Manuel G. Gonzalez and Cynthia M. Gonzalez (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2000), 11–12.
5. Thomas O. Larkin, quoted in Neal Harlow, *California Conquered: The Annexation of a Mexican Province, 1846–1850* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 11.
6. Harlow, *California Conquered*, 14.
7. Alta California, at least the settled part, was smaller than the current state of California, consisting principally of the coastal region up to San Francisco, and the valleys adjacent to the coast. Despite the fact that Mexico owned the entire Southwest, California was isolated from colonies in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.
8. David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 11.
9. Castañeda, *Presidarias y Pobladorias*, 6.
10. Harlow, *California Conquered*, 18.
11. Antonio Ríos-Bustamante, "The Barrioization of Nineteenth-Century Mexican Californians: From Landowners to Laborers," in *En Aquel Entonces*, 73.
12. Castañeda, *Presidarias y Pobladorias*, 9.
13. Fredrico A. Sánchez, "Rancho Life in Alta California," in *En Aquel Entonces*, 30. A full description of the economy of Alta California, and especially the labor of the California Native Americans, is beyond the scope of this essay. California remained agricultural, and the most important source of cash, and only during the Mexican period was tallow and hides. I refer the interested reader to Steven W. Hackel's excellent survey of the economy of early California: "Land, Labor, and Production: The Colonial Economy of Spanish and Mexican California," in Ramon A. Gutiérrez and Richard J. Orsi, eds., *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 111–146.
14. Ibid.
15. Harlow, *California Conquered*, 21.
16. Brigida Briones, "Domestic Life in Monterey in 1827," in *Sketches of Early California*, comp. Donald DeNevi (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1971), 43–44. For an especially penetrating analysis of gender roles in patriarchal early California, see Castañeda, *Presidarios y Pobladorias*.
17. Lynn Bowman, *Epic of a City* (Berkeley: Howell-North, 1974), 52.
18. William H. Davis (1822–1909), "Indian Insurrection and Treachery," in *Sketches of Early California*, comp. Donald DeNevi (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1971), 39.
19. Sánchez, "Rancho Life," 30.
20. Ibid., 33–35.
21. See Anthony Shay, "Function of Dance in Human Societies" (master's thesis, California State University, Los Angeles, 1970), Chapter Two.
22. Hubert Bancroft, *California Pastoral 1768–1848* (San Francisco: History Co. Pub., 1888), 408.
23. Dr. Platon Vallejo, quoted in Lucille Czarnowski, *Dances of Early California Days* (Palo Alto, CA: Pacific Books, 1950), 19. It should be noted that many Anglo Americans attempted to call every dance and song in early California "Spanish" as opposed to "Mexican," with its lower social status. This is what the eminent California historian Carey McWilliams termed the "heritage fantasy," that is, the romanticizing of a white, European "Spanish" heritage in place of the actual racially mixed Mexican population,

largely recruited from the Mexican states of Sinaloa that settled California. As historian David Weber states, "From Texas to California, Anglo Americans were shocked to meet a predominantly mestizo population" (Weber, *The Spanish Frontier,* 327). For example, the documentation of the music and songs they labeled Spanish folk songs were, in fact, salon music current in Mexico City in the nineteenth century. In 1991, I attended an National Endowment for Humanities-sponsored summer scholars' seminar titled "Latin American Music in its Historical and Cultural Context," directed by Professor Gilbert Behague at the University of Texas, Austin. After tracking down every anthology of "Spanish" folk songs that American aficionados of "Spanish" California collected from Californios, Dr. Behague and I concluded that none of them were of Spanish origin.

24. Don José del Carmen Lugo, "Life of a Rancher," trans. T. Savage, *California Historical Society Quarterly* 32 (September 1950): 235–236. The original ms., in Spanish, is in the Bancroft Library, Berkeley, CA. It was recorded in 1877.

25. According to historian Douglas Monroy: "Positively defined in Mexican California, the phrase *gente de razón* came to refer to anyone who was Catholic, Spanish-speaking, and who renounced instinctual behavior in favor of service to work, community and the Crown. Negatively, it came to contrast a resident of California with anyone who behave like and 'Indian,' or how an Indian was imagined to be.... This notion, not the actual qualities of the Indians and their cultures, formed the primary caste distinction in Alta California. The mulatto and mestizo Don Pio Pico, or the mestizo Governor José Figueroa, or one like Don Manuel Domínguez, who was so dark that he was banned from testifying in court after the American conquest were all considered de razón. *Sin razón* were the Indians tyrannized in the missions, raiding in the wild, or alcoholic in the pueblo; the uncouth lower-class immigrants known as *cholos*; and the vulgar American trappers who wandered into California" (Monroy, "The Creation and Re-creation of Californio Society" in *Contested Eden,* 179). It is important that the reader keep in mind the highly racialized atmosphere of California, at its height through the 1960s. Mexican Americans who wandered into white areas of Los Angeles risked being beaten, or worse.

26. Dmitry Zavalishin, "California in 1824," translated from Russian and annotated by James R. Gibson, *Southern California Quarterly* 55 (Winter 1973): 395. This passage, written by a Russian officer who visited Monterey, feeds into the heritage fantasy, and one imagines that there existed spacious, gracious homes. The reality was different. Historian David Weber more accurately notes: "The Californios of the Spanish era had lived in simple one-story adobes, many with flat, tar-covered roofs, and few with wooden floors, glass windows, fireplaces, or tree-shaded landscaping. Anglo Americans reimagined those modest structures as elegant two-story, red-tile-roofed structures, with carved woodwork and cantilevered balconies that looked into tree-filled patios where water played in fountains. . .This architectural style, which came to be called Mission Revival, had its origins in California in the 1880s, but its vocabulary of stucco walls, red tiles, arched logias, and bell towers spoke to the nation as well as the state after 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago gave Mission Revival a wide audience" (Weber, *The Spanish Frontier,* 343).

27. Esteban de la Torre, "Pre-American Monterey," *Touring Topics* (October 1930): 30.

28. Eulalia Perez de Guillen, "Keeper of the Keys," *Touring Topics* (January 1929): 25.

29. The custom of placing multiple hats on the heads of women as they danced must have been common in several parts of Mexico, because Amalia Hernandez, the former choreographer and artistic director of Ballet Folklorico de México, uses it in her suite of dances from Vera Cruz.

30. Alfred Robinson, *Life in California* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1969), 63.

31. Bancroft, *California Pastoral 1768–1848,* 408.

32. Ibid., 450.

33. Harris Newmark, *Sixty Years in Southern California, 1853–1913* (1916; Los Angeles: Zeitlin & Van Bruge, 1970), 136–137. The Bella Union was the largest hotel in Los Angeles in the 1840s and 1850s and was about fifteen miles from the Palos Verdes Rancho.

34. Antonio Coronel, "Things Past," *Touring Topics* (September, 1929): 22.

35. Walter Colton, *Three Years in California* (New York: Barnes, 1850), 164.

36. Davis, "Indian Insurrection," 39–40.

37. Newmark, *Sixty Years in Southern California,* 136–137.

38. Horace Bell, *Reminiscences of a Ranger* (Los Angeles: Yarnell Press, 1881), 195– 203.

39. Lucille Czarnowski, in her 1950 *Dances of Early California Days,* provides descriptions and instructions for many of the patterned dances from 1850 and beyond. There were groups of descendants still performing them at museums and other settings, but these were not the exciting improvised dances like el son and el jarabe that were fiery and challenging.

40. De la Torre, "Pre-American Monterey," 53.

41. Ibid.

42. Bowman, *Epic of a City,* 52.

43. Zavalishin, "California in 1824," 397.